

Bush proposal would allow Forest Service to sell unused buildings

Dan Berman, *E&E Daily* reporter

The Bush administration has sent a legislative proposal to Capitol Hill that would allow the Forest Service to sell off thousands of unused administrative sites in order to raise funds, Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey said yesterday.

The Forest Service Facility Realignment and Enhancement Act of 2005 would allow the agency to divest itself of buildings, warehouses and other facilities that have outlived their usefulness. Proceeds would be placed in a fund that contributes, in part, to funding the agency's \$5.2 billion maintenance backlog.

Similar language was included in the fiscal year 2006 Interior spending bill passed by the Senate Appropriations Committee last week.

The most valuable real estate at issue is in areas such as Los Angeles and Aspen, Colo., once remote, where cities have grown around the holdings.

"The value is in some cases very large," Rey told reporters yesterday at a House Forests Subcommittee hearing, saying a set of sites could fetch \$50 million. The legislative proposal is based on a pilot project that has proven successful in disposing of unused facilities in Southern California and elsewhere, Rey said.

The Forest Service is maintaining a list of facilities it would like to sell but does not have a set number or monetary goal, Rey said. Overall, the Forest Service has 40,000 buildings facilities -- compared to 30,000 employees, Rey said.

Forests Subcommittee Chairman Greg Walden (R-Ore.) said he has discussed the proposal with Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth and hopes it can move forward. No congressional sponsor has emerged for the proposal.

The legislative proposal is likely far less controversial than a proposal earlier this year designed to save the agency money. In March, Forest Service officials asked regional foresters to consider closing campgrounds, trails and other recreational sites in national forests to save money.

"It is likely that most forests will have to make tough decisions to close some sites, curtail operations at other sites, and decommission some sites in order to define a sustainable program," former Forest Service Deputy Chief Tom Thompson told regional foresters in a March 4 memorandum. Thompson sent the memo two days before leaving the agency.

The effort is targeted at developed recreation sites such as campgrounds, boat launches, rental cabins, horse camps, fire lookouts, picnic sites, snow parks and trailheads ([Greenwire](#), April 13).

The issue came up at a subcommittee hearing yesterday on the topic of federal land ownership and its effect on local communities.

Subcommittee ranking member Tom Udall (D-N.M.) said he hoped the hearing could destroy the myths that the amount of land owned by the federal government is increasing and that federal land ownership hurts private property owners or local communities.

However, the hearing was essentially an opportunity for Western Republicans such as Reps. Jim Gibbons (Nev.), Rob Bishop (Utah) and Chris Cannon (Utah) to criticize the federal government for not disposing of its large land holdings.

Several bills have already been introduced this term to address the issue, including [H.R. 1370](#), from Cannon, that would require the federal government to conduct an inventory of its approximately 670 million acres of land and identify "surplus and unneeded" parcels for potential sale.

Along the same lines, Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) has introduced [H.R. 1235](#), a bill that would create a system under which any federal land acquisition over 100 acres in Western states would have to be offset by a corresponding sale of land of equal or greater value.

And [H.R. 1469](#), from Rep. Butch Otter (R-Idaho), would direct the Interior Department to pay local governments for entitlement land held by the federal government, or convey BLM land in lieu of payment.

However, while a legislative option may be supported by Western Republicans, none of the bills likely has the legs to reach the White House.